Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Wildlife Division

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA)

BUFFALO COULEE CONSERVATION EASEMENT PROPOSAL

I. INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) proposes to purchase a conservation easement on the Buffalo Coulee Project property, consisting of approximately 2,825 acres of private land in Valley County northwest of Glasgow and near Vandalia. This property is composed of native shrub and prairie grasslands habitat that has been found to be critically important to wintering migratory antelope and serves as an important role with key linkage between summer and winter ranges with migrating sage grouse. The property also includes approximately 2 miles of Milk River riparian habitat, along with hay meadows and managed cropland. This conservation project reflects the desire of all parties to continue the landowner's agricultural operation, while maintaining and enhancing wildlife habitats. This easement will keep the property in private ownership and operation, preserve important wildlife habitats and guarantee managed public access for hunting and other recreational pursuits.

II. AUTHORITY AND DIRECTION

Montana FWP has the authority under State law (87-1-201, Montana Code Annotated) to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. FWP also has the authority to acquire land or interests in land for these purposes (87-1-209, MCA). As with other FWP property acquisition proposals, the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission and the State Land Board (for easements greater than 100 acres or $100,000) must approve any easement proposal by the agency. This Environmental Assessment (EA) is part of that decision making process.

III. LOCATION OF PROJECT

The Buffalo Coulee Project is located approximately 2 miles southwest of Vandalia, and also includes property located 4 miles northwest of Glasgow, and 2 miles east of Tampico. It consists of 2,825 total acres. The Milk River flows along the western boundaries of the river property, and Buffalo Coulee bisects the uplands unit near Vandalia. All of the land involved is within deer/elk hunting district 630. A map of the property is included as Appendix I in this document.

IV. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The primary purpose of this action is to preserve the integrity of the native habitats and their traditional agricultural use and ownership. The primary habitats represented on the Buffalo Coulee Project property include riparian corridors, sagebrush and shrub grasslands, and plains grasslands. Critical winter range for migrating antelope, and habitat that serves as migratory linkage to migrating sage grouse, will be perpetuated by maintaining and improving existing habitat. In addition, wildlife use, including sharp-tailed grouse, mule deer, white-tailed deer, ring-necked pheasants, Merriam's turkeys, mourning doves, several species of ducks, and a wide variety of native species of migratory birds, songbirds, small mammals, and bats, will be perpetuated.

A secondary result of this project is guaranteed public access to this farm and ranch land for hunting and other recreational pursuits. Currently, free public access is allowed on the Buffalo Coulee Project property. Acquisition of this easement will ensure and promote public recreation on this property and provide additional access to the Milk River and associated uplands. Several farms along the Milk River and associated uplands have been for sale at prices that prohibit the purchase of this land by local agricultural producers. These farms have been marketed based on their recreational values and proximity to the Milk River; once purchased, new landowners have typically closed off any public recreational opportunities.

V. DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is for FWP to purchase, hold and monitor a conservation easement on the Buffalo Coulee Project property. This easement would include 2,825 acres of the ranch which is all the deeded property. The total purchase price for the proposed easement will be based on appraisal, and is estimated to be in the range of $400,000 to $800,000. FWP would also cost-share fencing and water development materials required to implement the grazing system (approximately $74,300 in one-time start-up cost), and would pursue partnerships with other agencies and entities to help defray such costs. FWP's Habitat Montana is the primary funding source for this project.

Specific terms of the easement in their entirety are contained in a separate legal document, which is the proposed "Deed of Conservation Easement". This document lists FWP and landowner rights under the terms of the easement, as well as restrictions on landowner activities. The rights of both parties and restrictions on landowner activities were negotiated with and agreed to by FWP and the landowner.

To summarize the terms of the easement, FWP's rights include the right to:

(1) identify, preserve and enhance specific habitats, particularly river bottom riparian, sagebrush and shrub grasslands, and prairie grasslands;
(2) monitor and enforce restrictions;
(3) prevent activities inconsistent with the easement;

(4) ensure public access for the purpose of recreational hunting. Hunting access for all sex and age classes of game animals and game birds during all established seasons will be provided for a minimum of 750 hunter days each fall, and a minimum of 150 angler days annually.

The landowner will retain all of the rights in the property that are not specifically restricted and that are not inconsistent with the conservation purposes of the proposed easement, including the right to:

(1) pasture and graze this land in accordance with the grazing system described in the Management Plan (See Appendix II);
(2) maintain water resources;
(3) maintain the existing residences, sheds, corrals, and other improvements at the farmstead located on the farm;
(4) construct, remove, maintain, renovate, repair, or replace fences, roads and other non-residential improvements necessary for accepted land management practices; and
(5) control noxious weeds.

The proposed easement will restrict uses that are inconsistent with the conservation purposes of the easement, including the following uses of the property:

(1) control or manipulation of existing native vegetation, including cottonwood and green ash trees;
(2) draining or reclamation of wetland or riparian areas;
(3) any subdivision;
(4) cultivation or farming beyond existing levels;
(5) outfitting or fee hunting;
(6) mineral exploration, development, and extraction by surface mining techniques;
(7) construction of permanent structures except as described above;
(8) commercial feed lots;
(9) establishment or operation of a game farm, game bird farm, shooting preserve, fur farm, menagerie or zoo;
(10) commercial or industrial use, except traditional agricultural use;
(11) refuse dumping

The conservation easement provides FWP with the right to conserve approximately 43 acres of native riparian habitat along the Milk River. Riparian restoration may include planting of native vegetation and fencing. The easement will require that the landowner and FWP work cooperatively to plant dense nesting cover, food plots, and woody cover for game bird habitat on up to approximately 370 acres.

VI. DESCRIPTION OF REASONABLE ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

The intent of this action on the Buffalo Coulee Project is to maintain this land as a traditional Montana working farm, consistent with the landowner's intent to continue to own, operate and maintain the property. The landowner does not desire to sell the property to FWP. Since conservation easements also represent FWP's preferred option for conservation efforts with private landowners, the only other alternative reviewed in this EA is the "No Action Alternative".

1. No Action Alternative

If the Department does not purchase a conservation easement to protect the Buffalo Coulee Project, the land can be expected to remain under current management practices. Currently, recreational access is allowed to the property through the Block Management Program but in the future, the land could be sold to subsequent owners who wouldn't provide public access for hunting or fishing. Additionally the ranch would remain vulnerable to rural subdivision and development, potentially compromising the habitat and recreational values of the land.

VII. EVALUATION OF IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. Land Resources

Impact of Proposed Action: No negative environmental impacts would occur as a result of this proposal. The terms of the proposed easement are structured to prevent adverse impacts on soils and vegetation. A grazing plan has been developed and will be implemented that will enhance soil maintenance (Management Plan, Appendix II). Subdivision and development of the land is restricted, as is additional cultivation. The proposed easement will insure that the land resources are maintained.

No Action Alternative: Without terms of the proposed easement being structured to prevent adverse impacts on soils and vegetation, there would likely be no change in the short-term. However, if the land was developed or sold, disturbance of soils from more intense agricultural practices, residential development and other commercial uses could occur.

2. Air Resources

Impact of Proposed Action: There would be no impact.

No Action Alternative: There would be no immediate impact.

3. Water Resources

Impact of Proposed Action: Current agricultural uses on the property have proven to be compatible with maintenance of water quality. However, positive impacts should be realized in surface and ground water as a result of improvements in soil condition and reduction of erosion by developing and improving rest rotation grazing systems, and protecting riparian areas. Additional water improvements will be developed in order to improve livestock distribution, range conditions, and riparian vigor throughout the ranch. There would be no negative impact over what is currently associated with a working ranch operation.

No Action Alternative: There would likely be no impact in the short-term. However, if the land was developed or sold without conservation protection, there would be no assurances that over time the use of this property wouldn't change from ranching and farming to some other use.

4. Vegetation Resources

Impact of Proposed Action: This action would result in a positive impact. The terms of the easement protect the quantity, quality and character of the native plant communities found on the property. The prescribed grazing program will enhance and maintain the vigor and productivity of vegetation on the Buffalo Coulee Project. The proposed action also ensures the land's primary use in the future will be farming and livestock grazing, which depend on maintaining a productive vegetative resource. Noxious weed management will be an important component of a successful farm operation.

No Action Alternative: Without protections of the quantity, quality, and character of the native plant communities found on the property, there would likely be no change in the short-term. However, if the land was developed or sold, there would be no conservation measures in place to maintain the productivity of the land. Future impacts to native vegetation and overall productivity of the land could be significant. In addition, there would be no long-term protection of existing native plant communities.

5. Fish/Wildlife Resources

Impact of Proposed Action: This action will benefit a variety of wildlife. The terms of the easement conserve the land as agricultural and open space to provide year-round habitat for many of Montana's native wildlife species. Wildlife and agriculture can coexist well together as demonstrated in Montana today. Conserving native plant communities is important for most of Montana's indigenous wildlife species. Implementation of a rest-rotation grazing system will ensure adequate quantity and quality of forage and cover for a variety of wildlife species. No adverse effects are expected on the diversity or abundance of game

species, non-game species or unique, rare, threatened or endangered species. There would be no barriers erected which would limit wildlife migration or daily movements. There would be no introduction of non-native species into the area.

No Action Alternative: Without terms to conserve the land as agricultural and open space to provide year-round habitat for many of Montana's native wildlife species, there would likely be no change in the short-term. However, there would be no provisions preventing development for recreational purposes. If this occurs, open space would diminish over time resulting in significant long-term negative effects to most species of wildlife. There would be no provisions preventing activities such as the construction of fences or other barriers that could inhibit wildlife movement. Wildlife species would be negatively impacted by the conversion of existing native vegetation to other uses.

6. Adjacent Land

Impact of Proposed Action: No negative impact is expected. Existing fences would be maintained along the perimeter of the Buffalo Coulee Project. Public hunting access will help in managing wildlife populations to lessen agricultural damage to this and adjacent ranches. FWP will work with any adjacent landowners that perceive possible impacts.

No Action Alternative: There will not be a change in the short-term, but if the land was developed or sold, it could result in wildlife caused agricultural damage to adjacent private lands.

VII. EVALUATION OF IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

1. Noise/Electrical Effects

Impact of Proposed Action: No impact would occur over existing conditions.

No Action Alternative: There would be no immediate impact.

2. Land Use

Impact of Proposed Action: There would be no impact with the productivity or profitability of the ranch, or conflicts with existing land uses in the area. The traditional uses of the land would be maintained under the Proposed Action.

No Action Alternative: If the land was developed or sold, it could affect habitat quality and current wildlife numbers. Public recreational opportunity would very likely be diminished.

3. Risk/Health Hazards

Impact of Proposed Action: No impact would occur.

No Action Alternative: No impact would occur.

4. **Community Impacts**

Impact of Proposed Action: There would be no anticipated negative impacts to the community. The scenic values and open character of this property would be maintained and enjoyed by the community in perpetuity. This issue is also addressed in the attached Socio-Economic Assessment.

No Action Alternative: Without protection of the scenic values and open character of this property being maintained for enjoyment by the public in perpetuity, hunting access and public access on this ranch would likely be restricted in the future, negatively affecting traditional recreational opportunities in the area.

5. Public Services/Taxes/Utilities

Impact of Proposed Action: There would be no effect on local or state tax bases or revenues, no alterations of existing utility systems or tax bases of revenues, nor increased uses of energy sources. As an agricultural property, the land would continue to be taxed as it has before. This issue is also addressed in the attached Socio-Economic Assessment.

No Action Alternative: No immediate impact would occur. If rural subdivision did occur in this area in the future, greater demands would be placed on county resources.

6. Aesthetics/Recreation

Impact of Proposed Action: There would be no impact. The easement would maintain in perpetuity the quality and quantity of recreational opportunities and scenic vistas and would not affect the character of the neighborhood. This issue is also addressed in the attached Socio-Economic Assessment.

No Action Alternative: There would be no guarantee of continued public access to the land or across the land for recreational purposes. If rural subdivision and/or other developments occur it would reduce the aesthetic and recreational quality of the area. Future landowners would likely not be as generous with recreational access as the current landowner.

7. Cultural/Historic Resources

Impact of Proposed Action: No impacts are anticipated. However, any surface disturbance associated with grazing improvements to be placed on state and federal land will be subject to any legally required cultural review.

No Action Alternative: Any future developments on this land would likely have an adverse impact on the cultural and historic values of this farm.

8. Socio-Economic Assessment

Please refer to the attached Socio-Economic Assessment for additional analysis of impacts on the human environment.

IX. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE

The proposed action should have no negative cumulative effect. However, when considered on a larger scale, this action poses a substantial positive cumulative effect on wildlife, range management, riparian habitats and open space. The ranch will remain in private ownership, continue to contribute to agricultural production and thus contribute to the local economy. The "No Action Alternative" would not preserve the diversity of wildlife habitats in perpetuity. Without the income from the proposed conservation easement, the current landowner or any successor owners might consider other income options, potentially including either selling the property or subdividing parts of it, or breaking native prairie for farming. Such land uses could directly replace wildlife habitat and negatively impact important public access to the ranch and to the Milk River.

X. EVALUATION OF NEED FOR AN EIS

Based on the above assessment, which has not identified any significant negative impacts from the proposed action, an EIS is not required and an EA is the appropriate level of review. The overall impact from the successful completion of the proposed action would provide substantial long-term benefits to both the physical and human environment.

XI. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The public comment period will begin on October 17, 2012 and run through November 9, 2012. Written comments may be submitted to:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Attn: Buffalo Coulee Project Conservation Easement
54078 Hwy 2 West
Glasgow, MT 59230

Or comments can be emailed to katsmith@mt.gov.

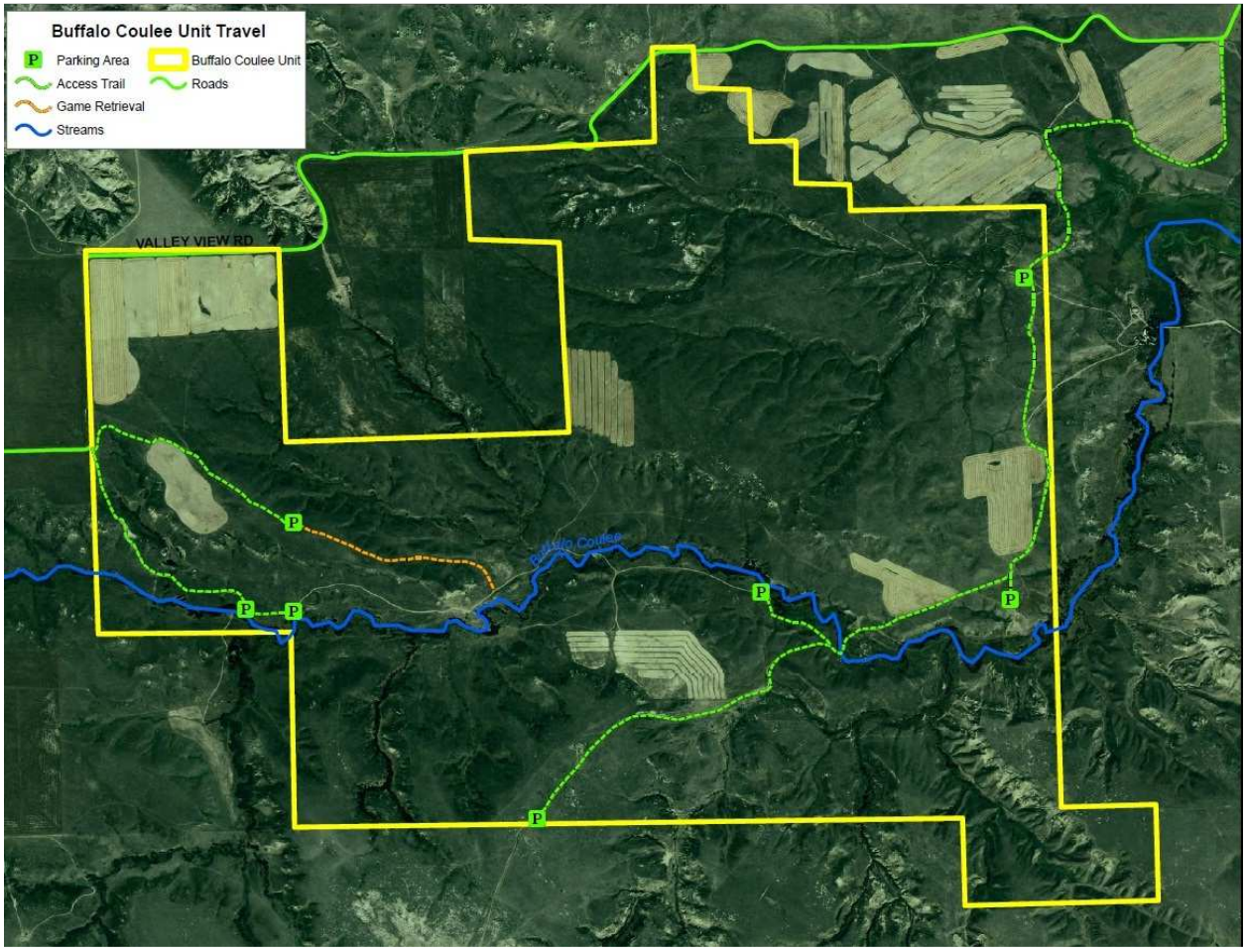
In addition, there will be a public hearing in Glasgow on November 7 at the Valley County Courthouse at 7:00 PM.

XII. NAME, TITLE AND PHONE NUMBER OF PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR PREPARING THIS EA

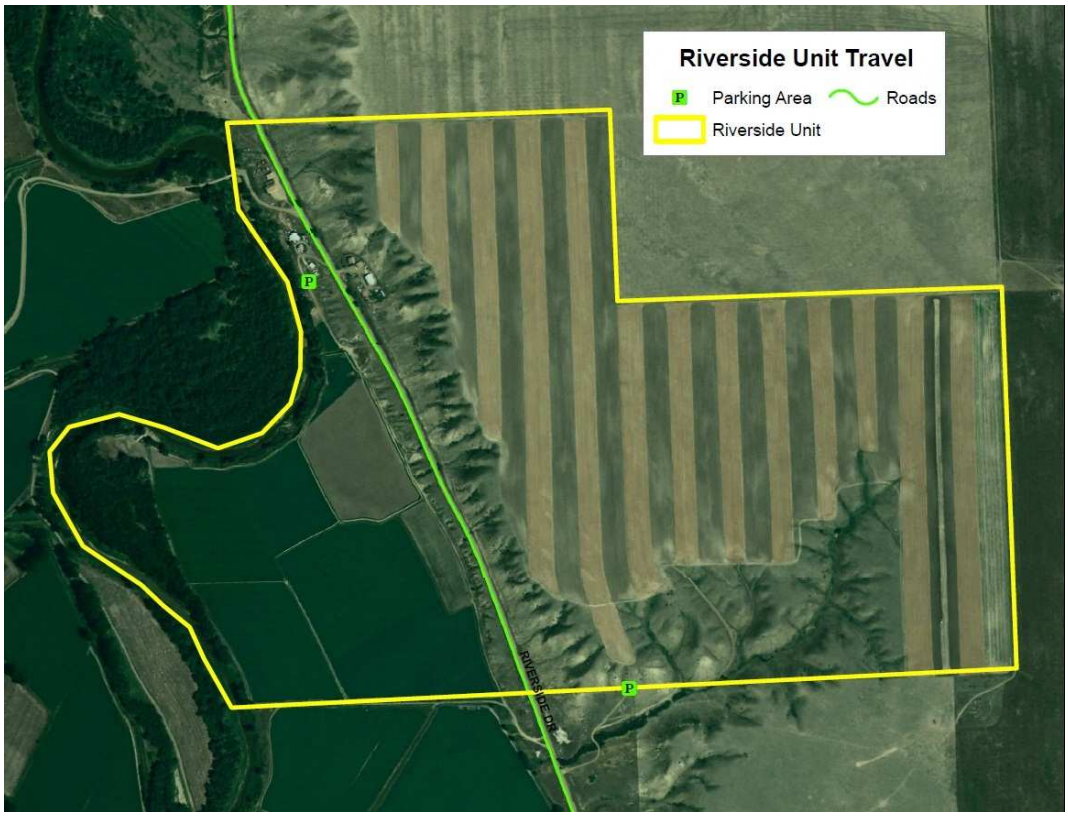
Kelvin Johnson, Wildlife Habitat Biologist, and Drew Henry, Wildlife Management Biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, 54078 Hwy 2 West, Glasgow, MT 59230, 406-228-3700.

APPENDIX I

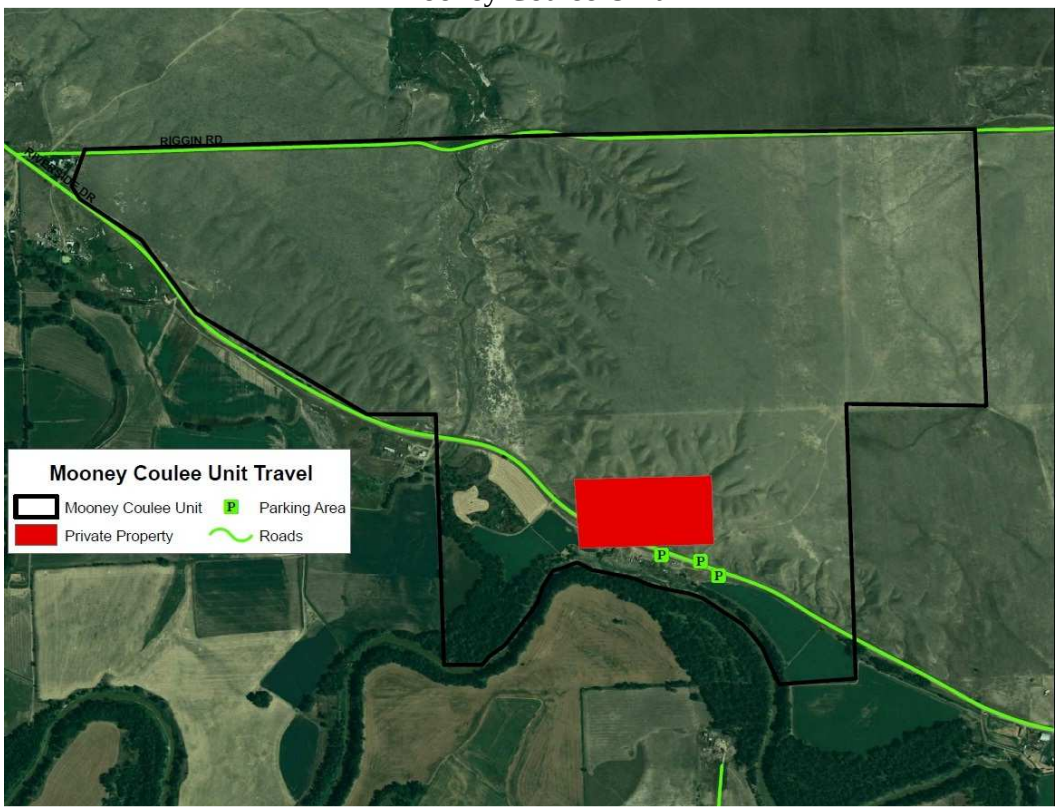
Buffalo Coulee Unit



Riverside Unit



Mooney Coulee Unit



APPENDIX II

Buffalo Coulee Conservation Easement

MANAGEMENT PLAN DRAFT

A. INTRODUCTION

This conservation easement is based on the habitat values found on the Buffalo Coulee properties. This 3,345 acre working ranch is composed of approximately 2,825 private acres, 160 acres DNRC, and roughly 360 acres BLM. Approximately 2,844 acres (85%) is native shrub and prairie grasslands and dense woody riparian habitat. Irrigated and dryland crops compose 501 acres (15%) of the project, but 370 acres are proposed for management as dense nesting cover (DNC), cottonwood tree regeneration, and food plot plantings, which would result in 96% of the project being either native prairie or habitat enhancement projects. It contains 2 miles of Milk River frontage. According to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP), the resource value of this property is high, based on the desirable quantities and qualities of productivity found within the riparian and wetland communities, grassland complexes, sagebrush communities, and prairie streams located on this ranch. See "*Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy, Executive Summary, 2005*." Available at Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 1420 East Sixth Avenue, Helena, MT 59620, or by internet at: http://fwp.mt.gov/specieshabitat/strategy/summaryplan.html, for details regarding these four complexes and plant communities.

Primary objectives of this conservation easement include: protection and enhancement of the riparian habitat associated with the Milk River and prairie streams associated with Buffalo Coulee and Mooney Coulee; conserving the grassland complexes and sagebrush communities associated with this ranch; continuing an active public access travel plan; and maintaining healthy wildlife populations within these habitats.

Because hunters are funding this easement, game species will be used as indicator species based on habitat availability and potential. In the riparian and wetland communities indicator game species include: whitetail deer, Merriam's turkeys, ring-necked pheasants, mourning doves, and waterfowl. In the grassland complexes and sagebrush communities, game species include: mule deer, antelope, sage grouse, and sharp-tail grouse. Additionally, State Wildlife Grants can provide FWP the opportunity to survey and inventory riparian-associated wildlife species in order to develop a baseline assessment of species richness and diversity, which may also be used, when appropriate, for assessing management alternatives.

The landowner and FWP intend to phase this management plan into place over the next 3 years. Until individual grazing systems are installed, the status quo grazing systems will be used in the interim. Once implemented in its entirety, the management plan will be revisited cooperatively between the landowner and FWP in order to reflect changes and/or adjustments that may have occurred during the implementation process or to review potential improvements to the management plan.

B. GOALS, OBJECTIVES, PROBLEMS, AND STRATEGIES

GOAL: To protect and enhance the riparian habitat and associated uplands along the Milk River and Buffalo and Mooney Coulees; and protect and enhance the grassland complexes, sage brush communities, and their associated northern glaciated prairie streams within the ranch boundaries; maximize hunter recreation on these lands; and preserve the overall integrity of these lands for future generations.

Objective 1. Practice proper stewardship, which translates to managing for improved soil composition, structure and productivity, and for the health and vigor of all vegetation communities, while positively impacting the traditional land uses.

Strategy 1. Maintain native Milk River and Buffalo and Mooney Coulee riparian habitats, grassland complex and sagebrush habitats, and associated prairie streams for wildlife habitat through easement protections. Limitations will include standing tree removal, breaking of native habitats, and removal of riparian vegetation, subdivision, house-site construction, grazing management, and commercial feedlots.

Strategy 1a. Exhibit A describes the 3-pasture rest rotation-grazing plans for the uplands and the grazing plans for the Milk River Valley units. Cattle will be allowed throughout the property, except on 2 specific areas that will be fenced out along Milk River riparian areas (which include proposed permanent vegetation restoration and DNC patches) until vegetative establishment has been determined. These areas are referred to as "Habitat Zones" (HZ's). Grazing may be allowed within HZ's as prescribed by FWP to manage the vegetation. The Fall/Winter grazing systems will utilize existing pastureland, as well as domestic hay and cropped fields. Repair and extensions of existing fences will delineate separate pastures (Exhibit D, Composite).

Strategy 1b. The Landowner will control noxious weeds where needed.

Objective 2. When demand exists, provide a minimum of 400 hunter days for big game, and 350 hunter days for game birds. In addition, a minimum of 150 angler days will be provided if the demand exists.

Access Strategies

Strategy 2. Provide hunter recreation through the existing FWP Block Management program. Access will be walk-in only, or walk-in only from designated trails or parking areas. By minimizing vehicular traffic, more secure areas for game species are provided during the hunting season, resulting in a better quality hunting experience. (Exhibit C, Travel Plan)

Strategy 2a. FWP will pursue agreements with adjacent landowners to allow hunter access for harvesting all available species.

Strategy 2b. Provide liberal season structures for all species. This will allow sportsmen the full opportunity to utilize this area for hunting to maintain healthy wildlife populations.

Habitat strategies

Strategy 2c. Healthy populations of upland game birds will result with the implementation of Strategies 1, 1a, and 1b. These strategies will provide quality nesting, brood rearing, and winter cover for these birds, as well help provide critical habitat for sage grouse that migrate through from northern Valley County and from Saskatchewan. These strategies will also provide improved year round habitat for whitetail deer, mule deer, and antelope, especially for fawning and security habitat, and will conserve and enhance crucial winter habitat for mule deer and antelope populations that migrate from northern Valley County and from Saskatchewan.

Strategy 2d. FWP and the Landowner will provide both wildlife habitat and efficient irrigation flows through the irrigation canals. This strategy will improve habitat by allowing vegetation on the outside banks of the canals to remain in the form of nesting and brood-rearing cover. Vegetation on the inside of canals will be controlled by the landowner by either mowing, or some other mechanical means to facilitate water flow.

Strategy 2e. Implement FWP's Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement strategies on several areas as outlined in Exhibit B, Proposed Enhancements. These include grazing systems, shelterbelts, DNC fields, fencing riparian areas and food plots. Implementation of this strategy will enhance upland game bird habitat quantity and quality. This strategy will also benefit whitetail deer, mule deer, antelope, waterfowl, and non-game species through improved habitat conditions. Food plots will be left each fall after harvest. Existing agriculture fields will be designated for conversion into DNC and into permanent woody vegetation. Shelterbelt opportunities will be explored. There will be 370 acres retired into DNC, food plots, and permanent cover, and 2 areas composed of approximately 43 acres fenced off from livestock activity.

Objective 3. Maintain healthy wildlife populations within the available habitats, taking into account the negative impacts wildlife may cause on nearby private lands.

Strategy 3. Maintain healthy, managed whitetail deer, mule deer, and antelope populations through the use of liberal hunting seasons. This strategy will be utilized.

Strategy 3a. On river units, the Block Management plan for this ranch will provide areas of security for whitetail deer during the hunting season. On upland units, the Block Management plan for this ranch will provide areas of security for mule deer and antelope during the hunting season. These strategies will assist in keeping deer from moving onto adjacent ranches that allow limited or no hunter access.

Strategy 3b. Montana FWP will pursue agreements with adjacent landowners to allow hunter access for harvesting whitetail deer on river units. This strategy will be an ongoing effort to alleviate depredation problems with whitetail deer in the area.

Objective 4. Provide non-hunting recreational and educational opportunities to the public through the viewing of wildlife, fishing, and various educational uses.

Strategy 4. Public opportunity for wildlife viewing will be enhanced through the Strategies found in Objective 1, as well as Strategies 2d and 2e. Improved populations of game and non-game species of birds and mammals will result from these habitat improvements and provide for public viewing. Access for wildlife viewing will continue to be on a permission basis from the Landowner.

Strategy 4a. Provide a minimum of 150 angler days of fishing if the demand exists. Fishing opportunities exist along the Milk River. Game fish commonly found in these areas include channel catfish, northern pike, and walleye. Fishing opportunities for the public will continue to be available through controlled access by the Landowner.

Strategy 4b. The Landowner may allow the property to be utilized for educational purposes associated with schools and various organizations. This conservation easement will demonstrate how traditional land uses can be implemented in a manner that benefits wildlife while maintaining a successful agricultural operation.

EXHIBIT A - GRAZING

Buffalo Coulee Ranch Grazing Management Plan Draft

1) Land Unit Description

The Buffalo Coulee Project includes 2,825 acres. Approximately 85% is native shrub and prairie grasslands and dense woody riparian habitat. Irrigated and dryland crops compose 15% of the project, but 370 acres are proposed for DNC, cottonwood regeneration, and food plot plantings, which would result in almost all of the project being either native prairie or habitat enhancement projects. There are 2 miles of Milk River frontage, and two creeks, Buffalo Coulee and Mooney Coulee Creeks, bisect this project.

This plan for livestock grazing on the Buffalo Coulee Project applies to lands lying in the Buffalo Coulee Unit, the Riverside Unit, and the Mooney Coulee Unit. The Buffalo Coulee portion of the ranch will consist of 1 grazing system that will be divided into 3 main pastures which will utilize a 3-pasture rest rotation grazing system. The Riverside and Mooney Coulee Units will operate in coordination with each other, and will consist of 1 grazing system that will be divided into 5 main pastures which will utilize an alternating year use rotation grazing system. Each grazing system will follow FWP's grazing standards for summer and winter grazing. In addition, the Landowner and FWP have identified 2 locations on cropped land where the winter grazing system will diverge from traditional FWP standards for grazing for animal husbandry purposes.

2) Current Management Narrative

The ranch is currently managed as a cow-calf livestock operation with a small amount of small grain production. Currently the ranch maintains approximately 80 – 100 head of cattle on the entire ranch. The Buffalo Coulee Unit is currently used for summer grazing, when cattle arrive usually in Mid-May, and then leave this system at the end of October. The Riverside Unit is used during the fall, where cattle use the uplands portions for a few weeks in November, and then they utilize the river bottom after ground freeze in order to minimize field impacts. The Mooney Coulee Unit is used during the winter until spring. Cattle utilize the river bottom during the winter, and then utilize one upland pasture to calve in April, and then are turned out into the next upland pasture for a few weeks until Mid-May, where they exit the system and head for the Buffalo Coulee Unit for the summer.

3) Planned Management Narrative with tables and maps

Buffalo Coulee Unit

Livestock will be managed using a 3-pasture rest-rotation grazing system between dates of May 15 through October 31. The 3 pastures for this system are designated on maps as **BC1**, **BC2**, and **BC3 (Table 1)**. Each year, 1 pasture is grazed during the growing season, 1 pasture is grazed after seed-ripe, and one pasture is rested.

Each year grazing rotation dates are: One pasture available to graze from May 15 to August 1; 1 pasture available to graze from August 1 to October 31; and 1 pasture rested from livestock grazing for the entire year. When livestock leave this system, they will go to the Riverside and Mooney Coulee grazing system.

Refer to Table 2 for an illustrated demonstration of the summer grazing system during the 10-year period from 2013 to 2022. Pasture designations BC1, BC2, and BC3 are illustrated in the grazing plan map (Figures 1, 2, 3).

Table 1: Buffalo Coulee Unit pasture numbers, names and grazing treatment

Pasture Number	Pasture Name	Pasture Use
BC1	Buffalo Coulee 1	Summer Grazing System
BC2	Buffalo Coulee 2	Summer Grazing System
BC3	Buffalo Coulee 3	Summer Grazing System

Table 2: Buffalo Coulee Project summer grazing system for that portion located in the Buffalo Coulee Unit

Year	Buffalo Coulee 1 (BC1)	Buffalo Coulee 2 (BC2)	Buffalo Coulee 3 (BC3)
2013	A	B	C
2014	B	C	A
2015	C	A	B
2016	A	B	C
2017	B	C	A
2018	C	A	B
2019	A	B	C
2020	B	C	A
2021	C	A	B
2022	A	B	C

A = Livestock grazing from May 15 – August 1 (period of rapid growth).
B = Livestock grazing from August 1 – October 31 (after seed ripe).
C = Rest from all livestock grazing for the year.

Figure 1: Map of the summer grazing system for the Buffalo Coulee Unit during Year 1.

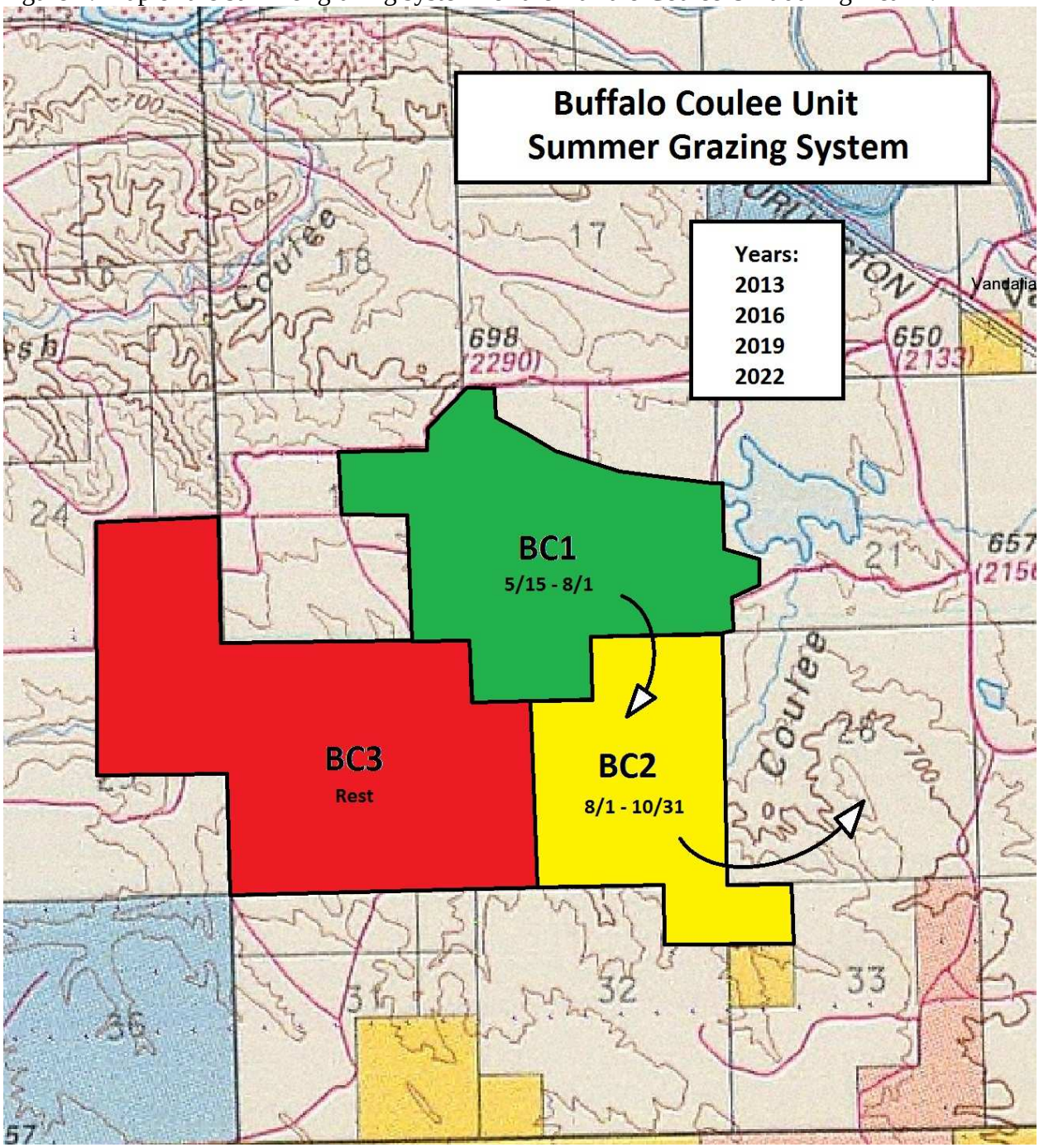


Figure 2: Map of the summer grazing system for the Buffalo Coulee Unit during Year 2.

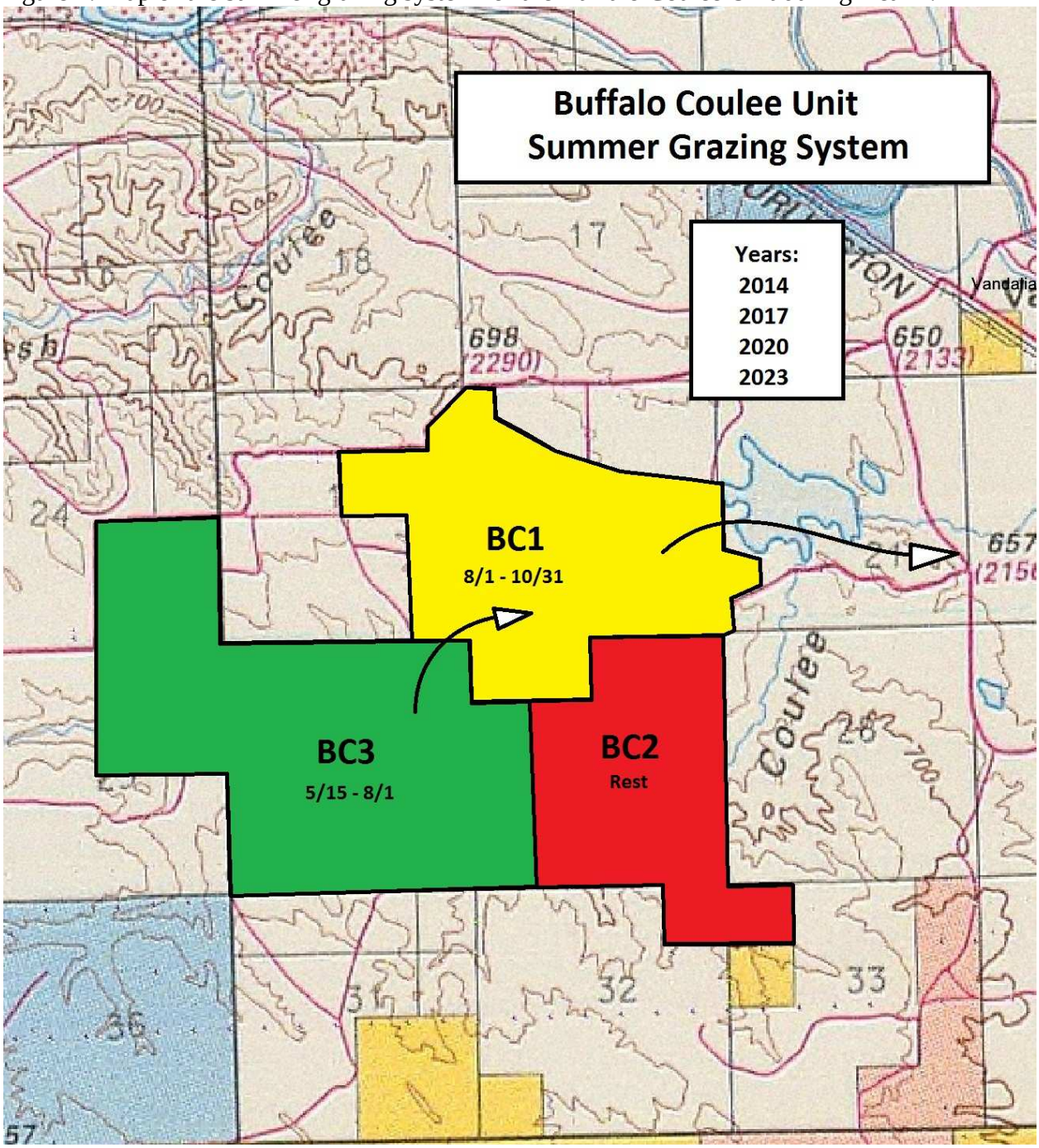
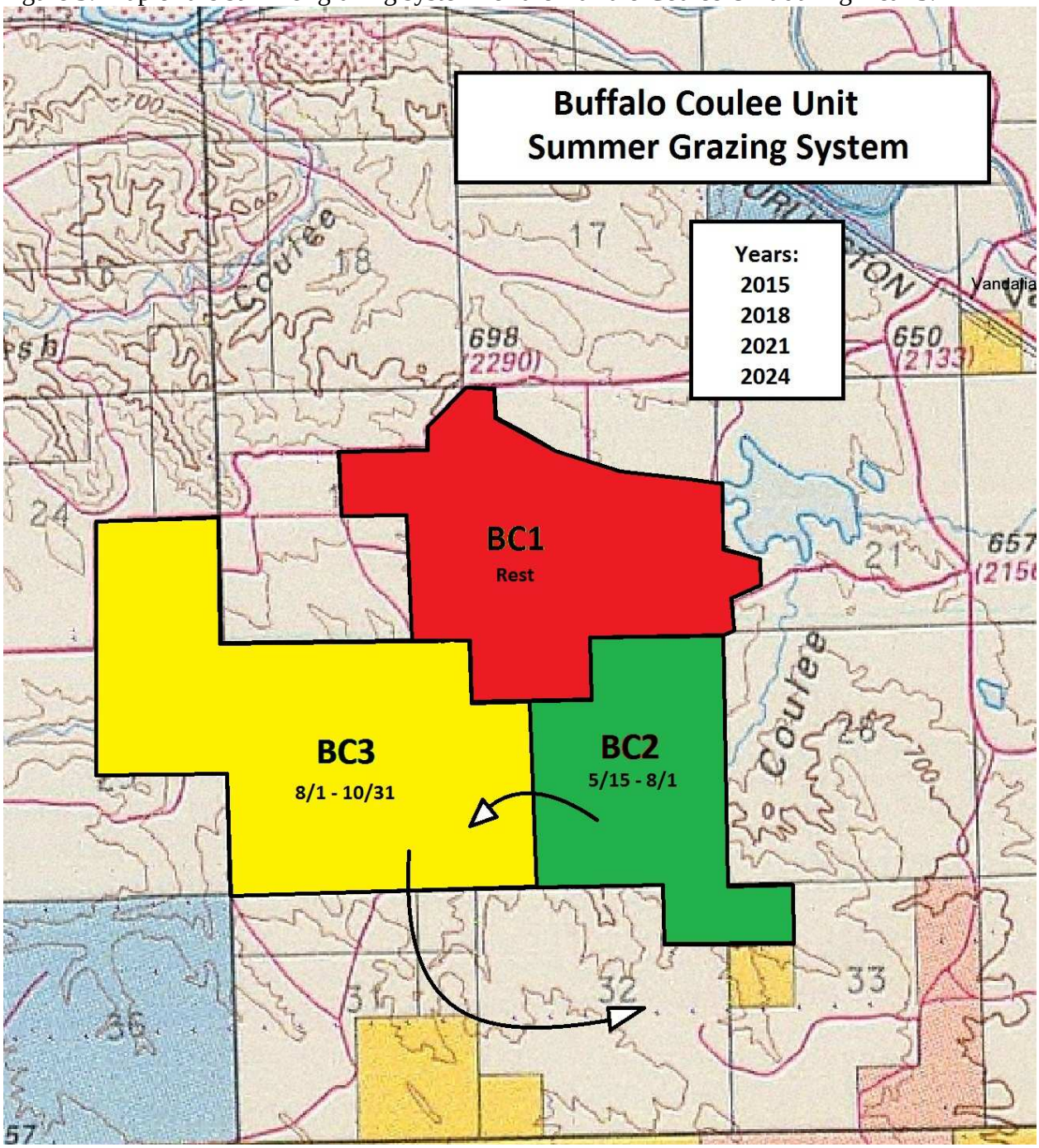


Figure 3: Map of the summer grazing system for the Buffalo Coulee Unit during Year 3.



Riverside Unit and Mooney Coulee Units

Livestock will utilize an alternating year use grazing system between the dates of November 1 and May 15. However, in order for this system to work, livestock will also be permitted to use 2 areas having designated annual use each year, as well as a pasture used as a pass-through and staging area each year. To help accommodate each annual use area, livestock will not be permitted within 2 designated habitat zones. Refer to Table 3 for pasture designations.

Pasture **RS1** will become available on November 1, and will serve mainly as a pass-through and staging pasture every fall for an approximate length of +/-2 weeks in November, until irrigated hay fields located within the river valley have frozen or dried (minimizing impacts on these fields with respect to equipment used to farm these fields the following summer), which usually occurs during the last half of November. This pasture is used to trail and sort cattle between their summer pastures located at Buffalo Coulee and their winter pastures located in the Riverside and Mooney Coulee Units.

Once livestock leave **RS1**, they will be permitted within 2 areas designated as livestock annual use areas, which includes areas labeled **RS2** and **MC1**. These 2 areas are composed entirely of irrigated hay and cropped fields, and do not compose any native or riparian habitats.

Pasture **RS2** will be available every year between the starting date of November 15 and ending date of April 1. Traditionally, livestock utilize this area for a few weeks and then are trailed over to **MC1**, located in the Mooney Coulee Unit. However, this pasture can be used until April 1 if needed. Livestock will not be permitted within the riparian zones and associated deciduous gallery located within **RS2**. This area will be protected as a habitat zone, and is designated as **HZ1** on the map.

Refer to Table 4 for an illustrated demonstration of the fall/winter grazing system during the 10-year period from 2013 to 2022. Pasture designations RS1, RS2, and HZ1 are illustrated in the grazing plan map (Figure 4).

Pasture **MC1**, located in the Mooney Coulee Unit, will also be available every year between the starting date of November 15 and ending date of April 1. Traditionally, livestock utilize this area after being trailed over from **RS2**. Livestock will not be permitted within the riparian zones and associated deciduous gallery located within **RS2**. This area will be protected as a habitat zone, and is designated as **HZ2** on the map.

Pastures **MC2** and **MC3** are composed of critical antelope winter range, where antelope winter from as early as mid-December until as late as mid to late-March. Therefore, they will serve as livestock calving pastures in the spring, and will be available between the starting date of April 1 and ending date of May 15. **MC2** will be available every even year, and **MC3** will be available every odd year. When livestock leave this system, they will go to the Buffalo Coulee grazing system.

Refer to Table 4 for an illustrated demonstration of the fall/winter grazing system during the 10-year period from 2013 to 2022. Pasture designations **MC1, MC2, MC3,** and **HZ2** are illustrated in the grazing plan map (Figure 4).

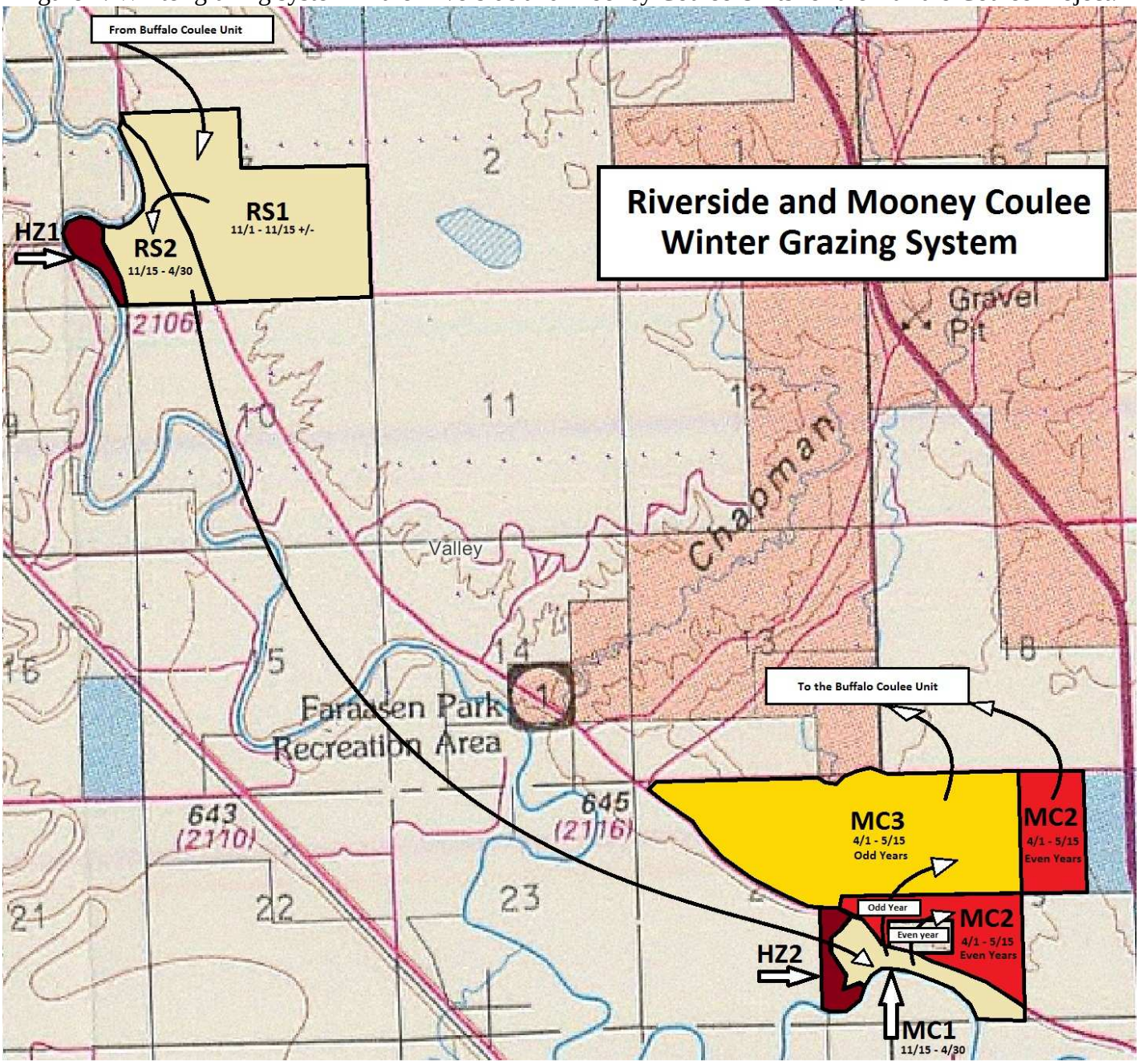
Table 3: Riverside and Mooney Coulee Pasture numbers, names and grazing treatments

Pasture Number	Pasture Name	Pasture Use
RS1	Riverside 1	Winter Grazing System
RS2	Riverside 2	Winter Grazing System
HZ1	Habitat Zone 1	Permanent Cover
MC1	Mooney Coulee 1	Winter Grazing System
MC2	Mooney Coulee 2	Winter Grazing System
MC3	Mooney Coulee 3	Winter Grazing System
HZ2	Habitat Zone 2	Permanent Cover

Table 4: Buffalo Coulee Project winter grazing system for that portion located in the Riverside and Mooney Coulee Units.

Year	RS1	RS2	HZ1	MC1	MC2	MC3	HZ2
2013	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
2014	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
2015	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
2016	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
2017	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
2018	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
2019	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
2020	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
2021	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
2022	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No

Figure 4: Winter grazing system in the Riverside and Mooney Coulee Units for the Buffalo Coulee Project.



4) Stocking Rate

This grazing plan does not address stocking rate. On deeded lands covered by the easement, the maximum stocking rate will be based on compliance with the grazing system. As long as the Landowner can graze livestock and remain in compliance with the grazing system, FWP will not be concerned about the stocking rate. The easement restrictions do not apply to BLM lands, and stocking rate on the BLM land leased by the landowner will ultimately be determined by the BLM.

5) Salt and Mineral Management

When salt and mineral supplements are determined to be used, they will be located in away from riparian and wetland zones in a manner that will minimize impacts to these areas. Sites will also be located away from any known leks (the gather or "dancing" grounds used each spring by sage grouse and sharptail grouse).

6) Range Improvements table

In order for the grazing system to operate the range improvements described below are essential. Improvement needs are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Improvements needed for grazing system development on the Buffalo Coulee Project.

Improvement	Location	Quantity	Cost	Funding Source	Timeline
Pasture Fence	BC3, BC2	2 miles	$ 14,300	Fed-State-L/0	2016
Well	BC3	200 feet	$ 6,000	Fed-State-L/0	2016
Pipeline	BC1	4 miles	$ 36,500	Fed-State-L/0	2016
Tanks	BC1	10	$ 17,500	Fed-State-L/0	2016

Whenever possible, pasture improvements will be cost shared between the landowner and FWP. In addition, other options will be explored to see if the Buffalo Coulee grazing systems would qualify and become enrolled in federal habitat programs. Funding that was committed by the National Wild Turkey Federation for habitat improvements and restoration projects along the Milk River will be considered, and additional partnerships will be pursued to further defray costs.

Cost estimates are based on 2012 NRCS payment schedules that account for both purchase of materials and labor and installation costs. If no additional partnerships are created to defray costs, a 50:50 partnership between FWP and the landowner will be established where appropriate. When conducting the 50:50 ratio cost-share projects, FWP's portion will include purchasing materials and the landowner portion will provide labor and installation as in –kind services.

This system will require 2 miles of fencing to be constructed. At $7,180 per mile for barbed wire fence, we estimate the total cost for required fences in the Buffalo Coulee portion of the easement to be $14,300. Electric fencing will be used along the Milk River riparian habitat zones instead of traditional fencing, due to frequent flooding issues in this area. The electric fencing portion will be temporary fencing, and the labor to set up and take down seasonally will

be provided by the landowner. This fencing is part of an ongoing project outside the scope of the conservation easement.

There will need to be water development projects in BC1, BC2, and BC3 of the Buffalo Coulee Unit in order to provide consistent water supply and in a manner that encourages grazing use of the uplands and reduces pressure on riparian zones. A new well is proposed near the west end of BC3 (highest altitude) near the existing power line. Well depth is estimated to be approximately 200 feet. Costs to drill and case the well at $30 per foot equate to $6,000. An estimated 4 miles of pipeline and up to 10 tanks that will utilize gravity flow, will need to be installed to provide an even distribution of water in all three pastures. Cost estimation for 4 miles of pipeline is $36,500 and for 10 tanks is $17,500.

7) How the grazing plan addresses Fish and Wildlife Objectives

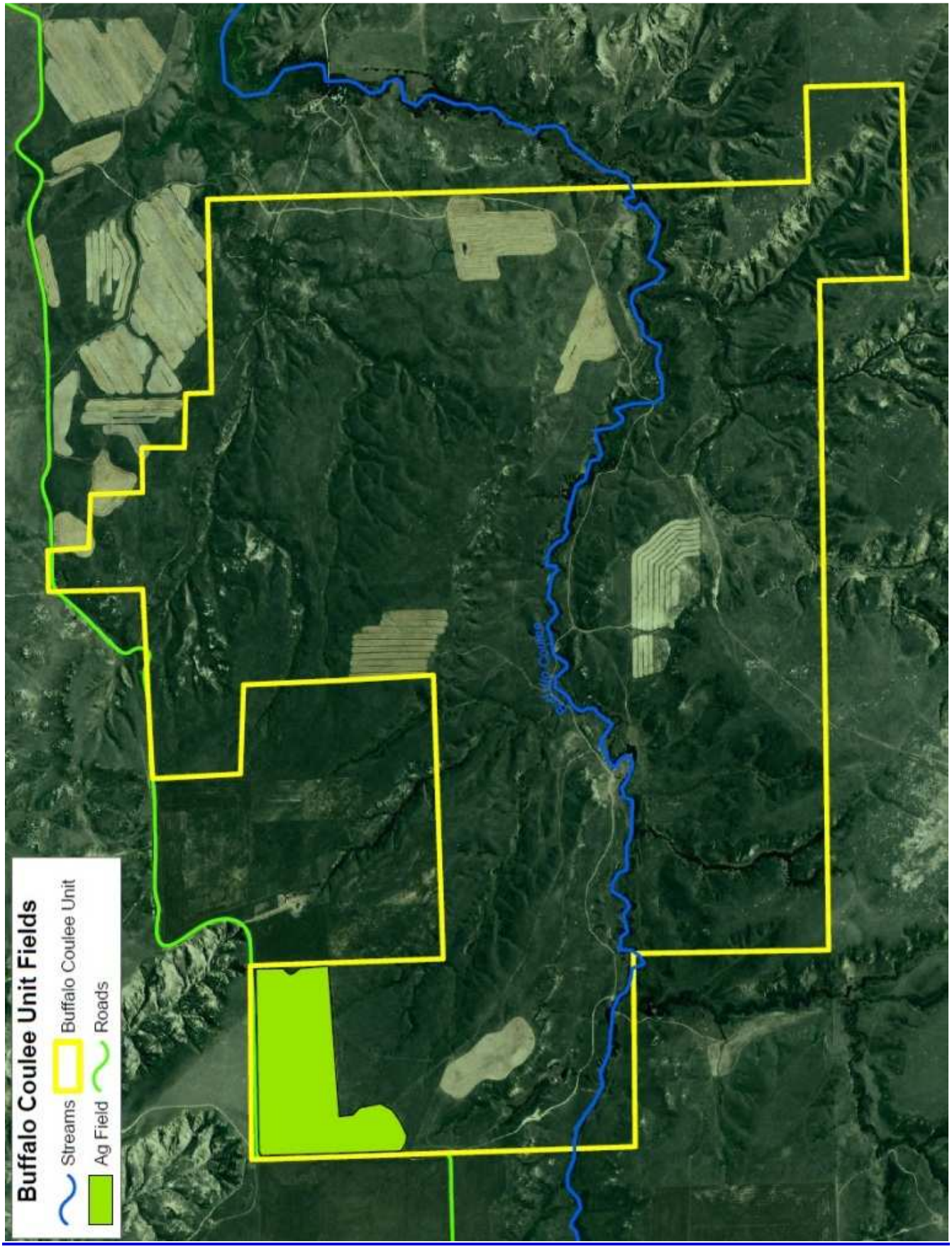
The overall objectives of this grazing system are to enhance and maintain the vigor and productivity of vegetation on the Buffalo Coulee Project. This grazing system can also ensure the land's primary use in the future will be farming and livestock grazing, which depend on maintaining a productive vegetative resource. This grazing system will benefit a variety of wildlife.

The terms of the easement conserve the land as agricultural and open space to provide year-round habitat for many of Montana's native wildlife species. Conserving native plant communities is important for most of Montana's indigenous wildlife species. Implementation of this rest-rotation grazing system will ensure adequate quantity and quality of forage and cover for a variety of wildlife species found in both uplands and riparian habitats. This system will help maintain and improve sage brush communities located on this property that have been found to be important to both sage grouse and wintering antelope.

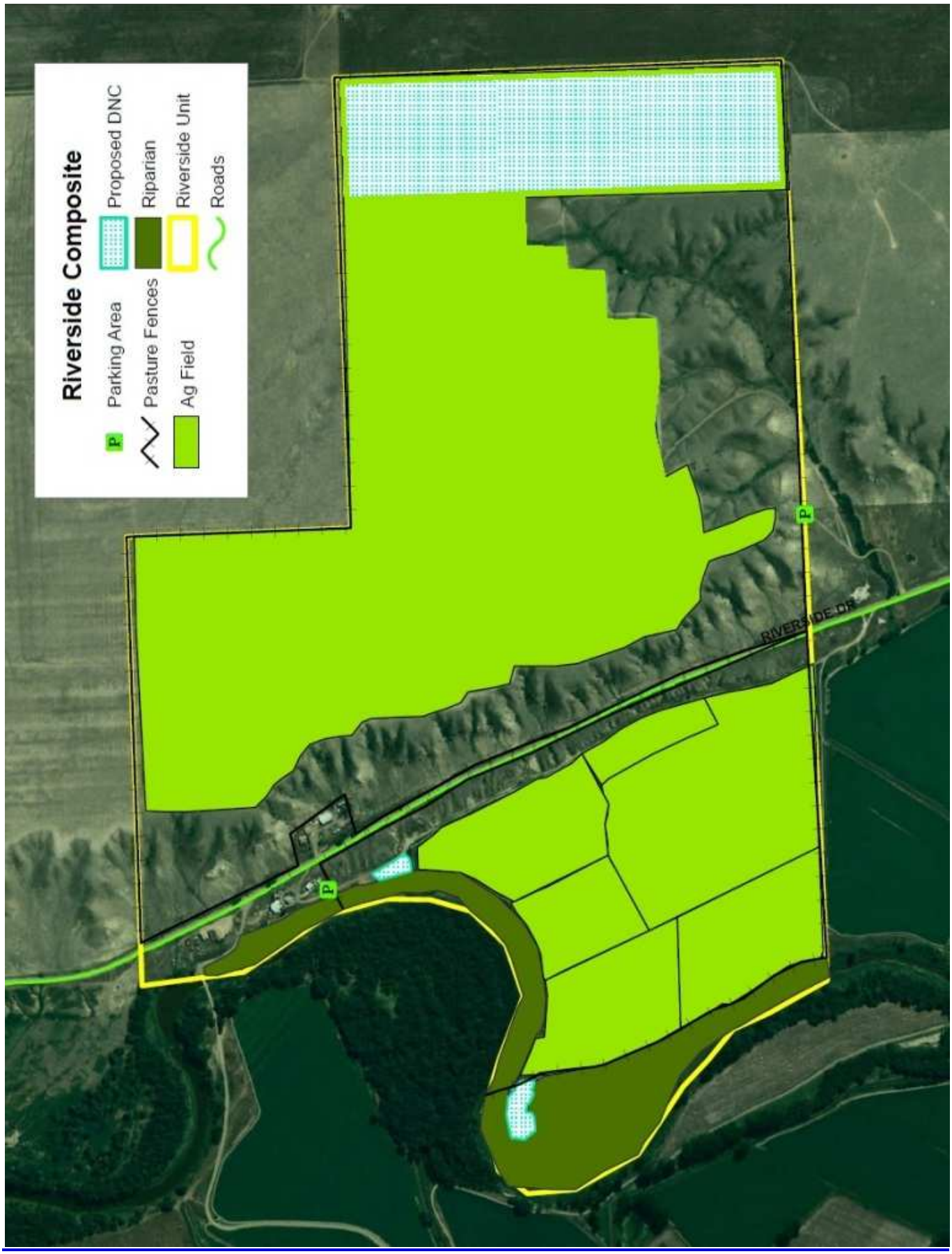
By developing and improving the grazing system, surface and ground water improvements could be realized as a result of better water distribution, improvements in soil condition, reduction of erosion, and protection of riparian areas. Additional water improvements will be developed in order to improve livestock distribution, upland range conditions, and riparian vigor throughout the ranch. Besides benefiting wildlife, this system should benefit fisheries associated with the Milk River.

Exhibit B - Fields

Buffalo Coulee Unit



Riverside Unit



Riverside Unit

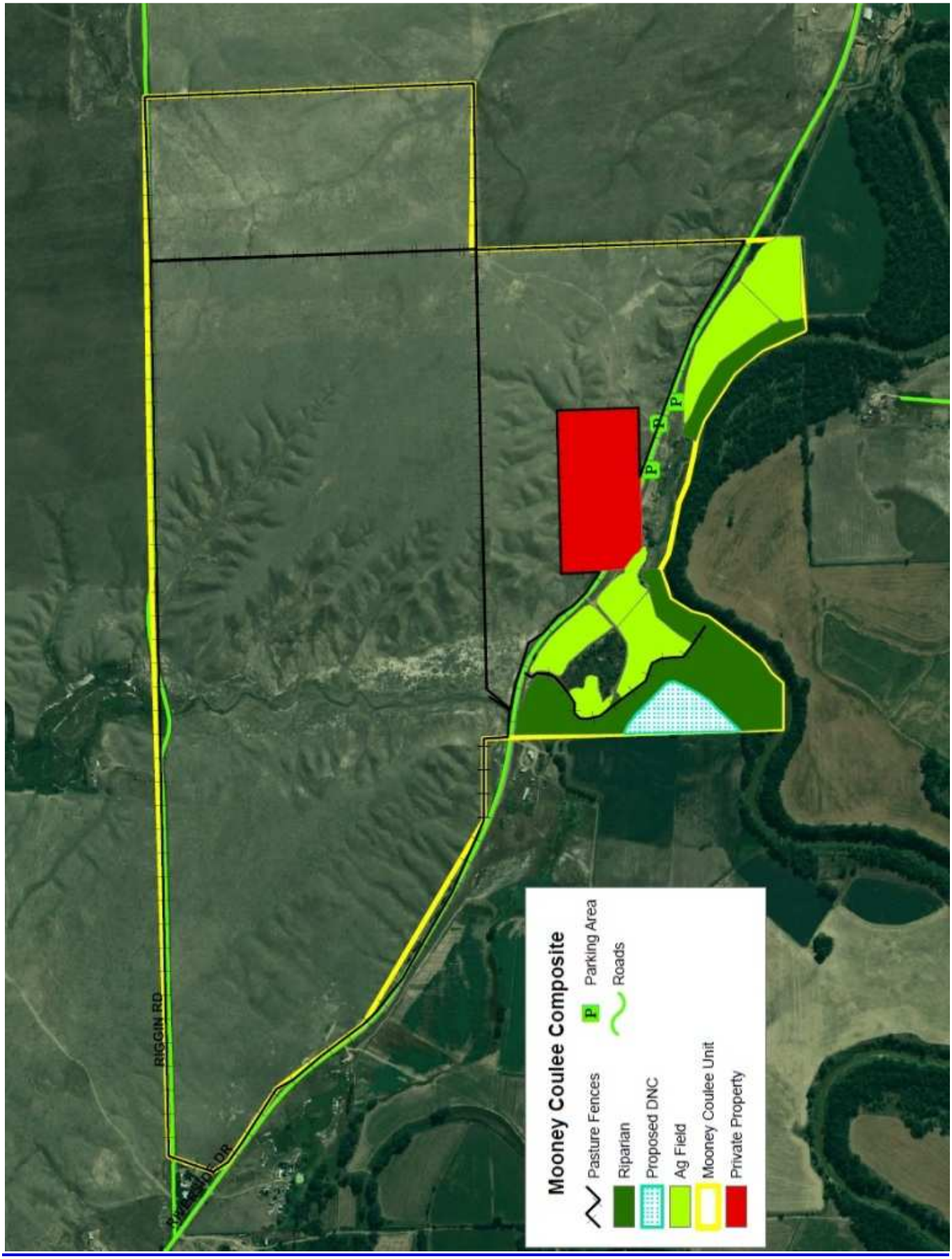
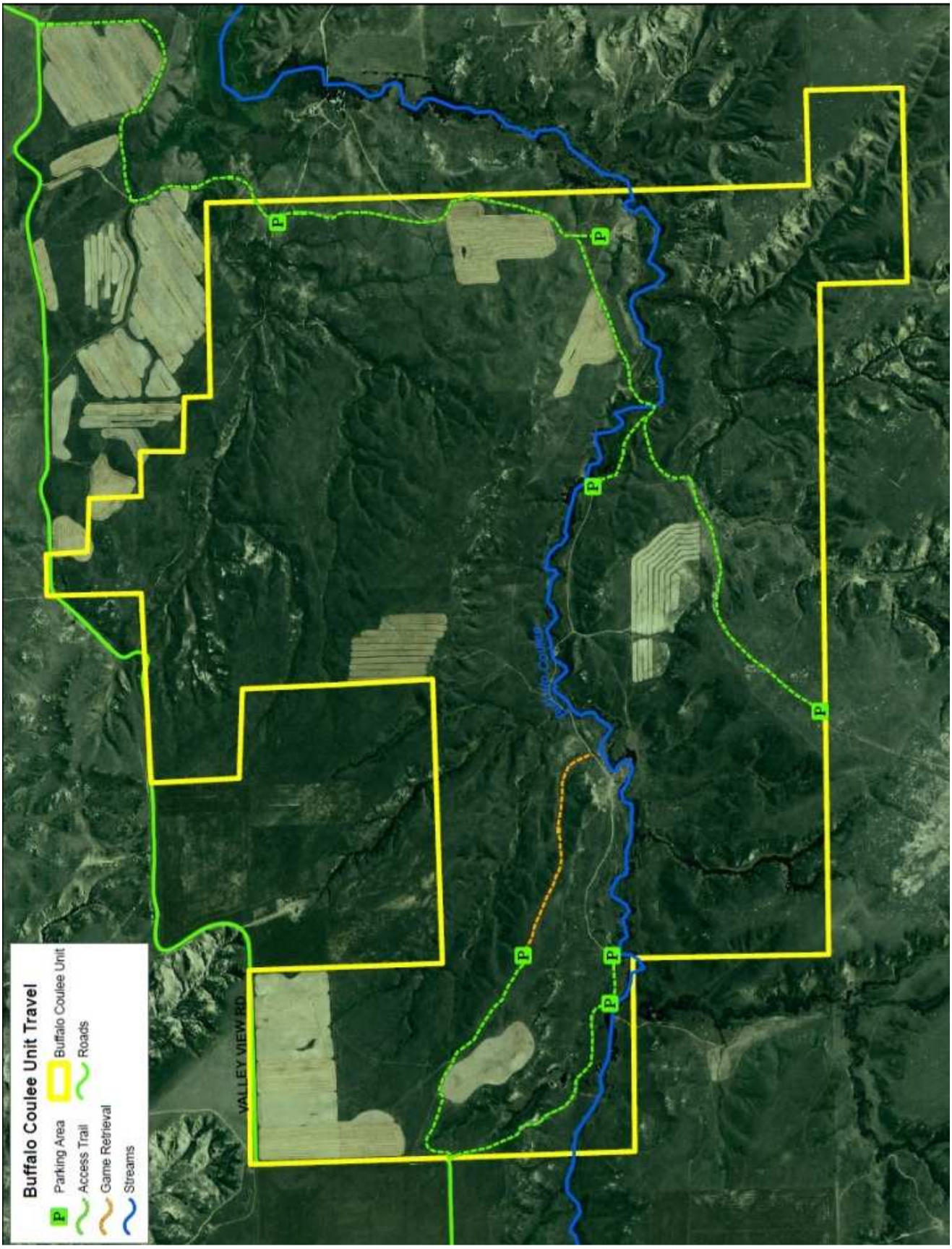
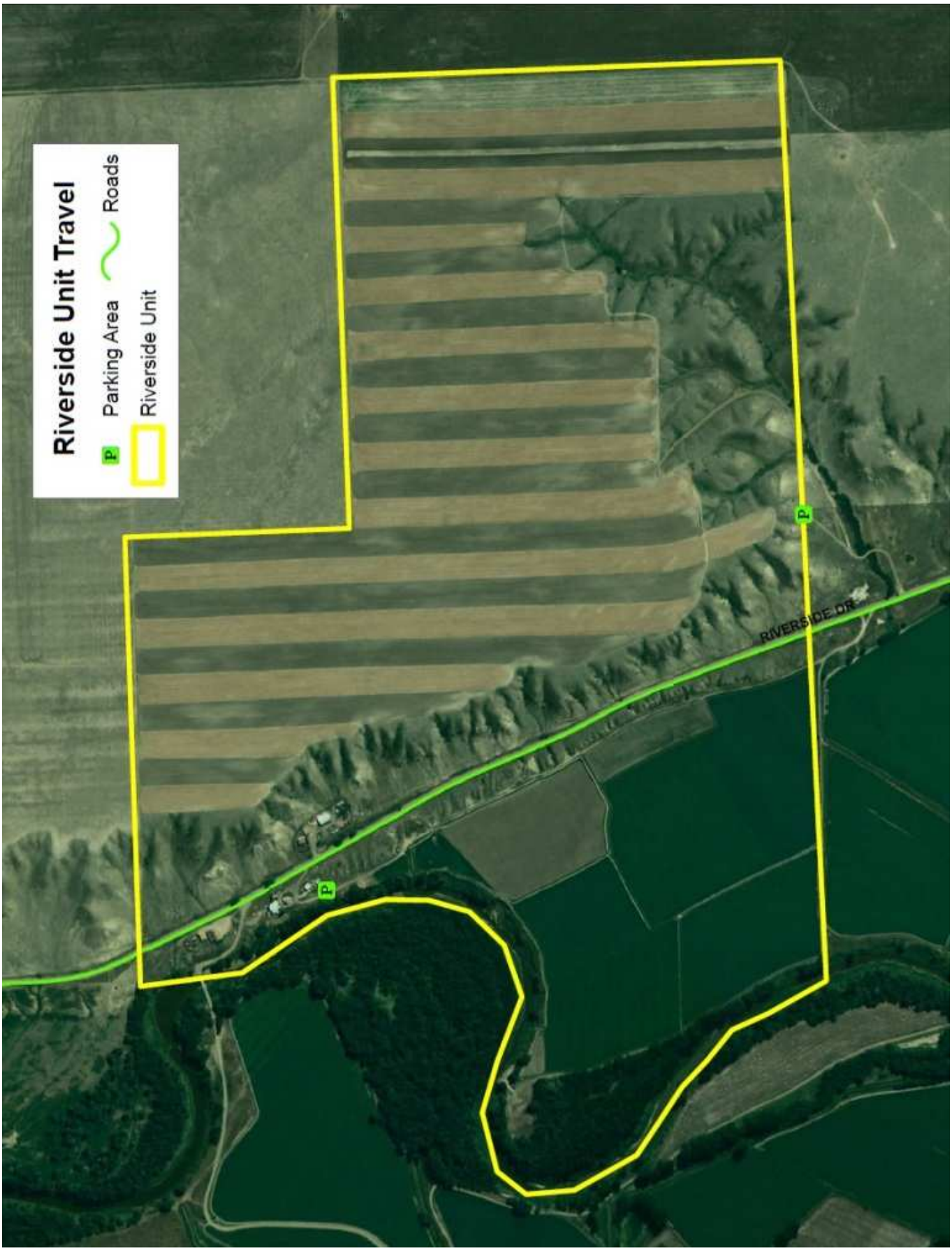


Exhibit C – Travel

Buffalo Coulee Unit




Riverside Unit Travel
Parking Area
Roads
Riverside Unit
RIVERSIDE DR

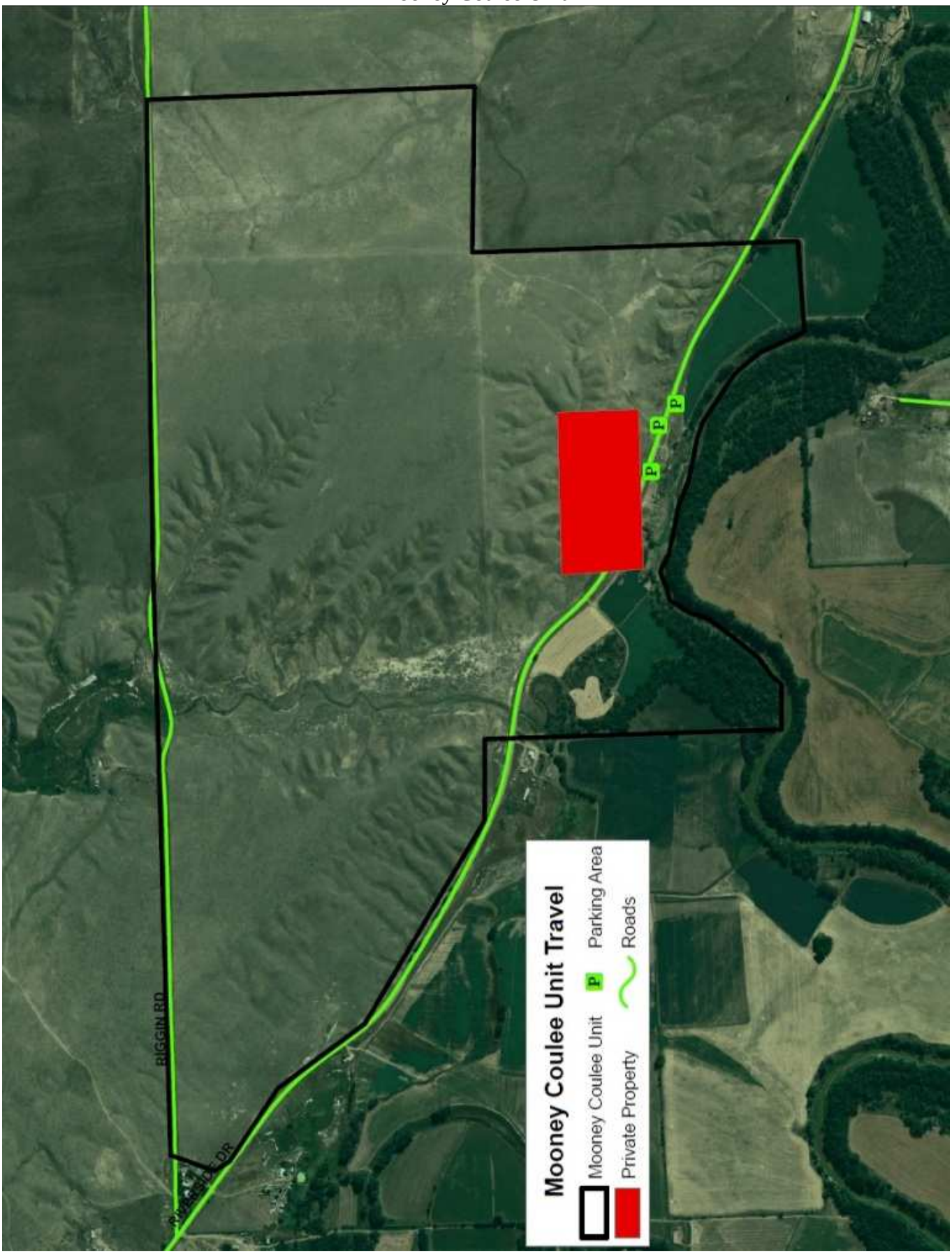
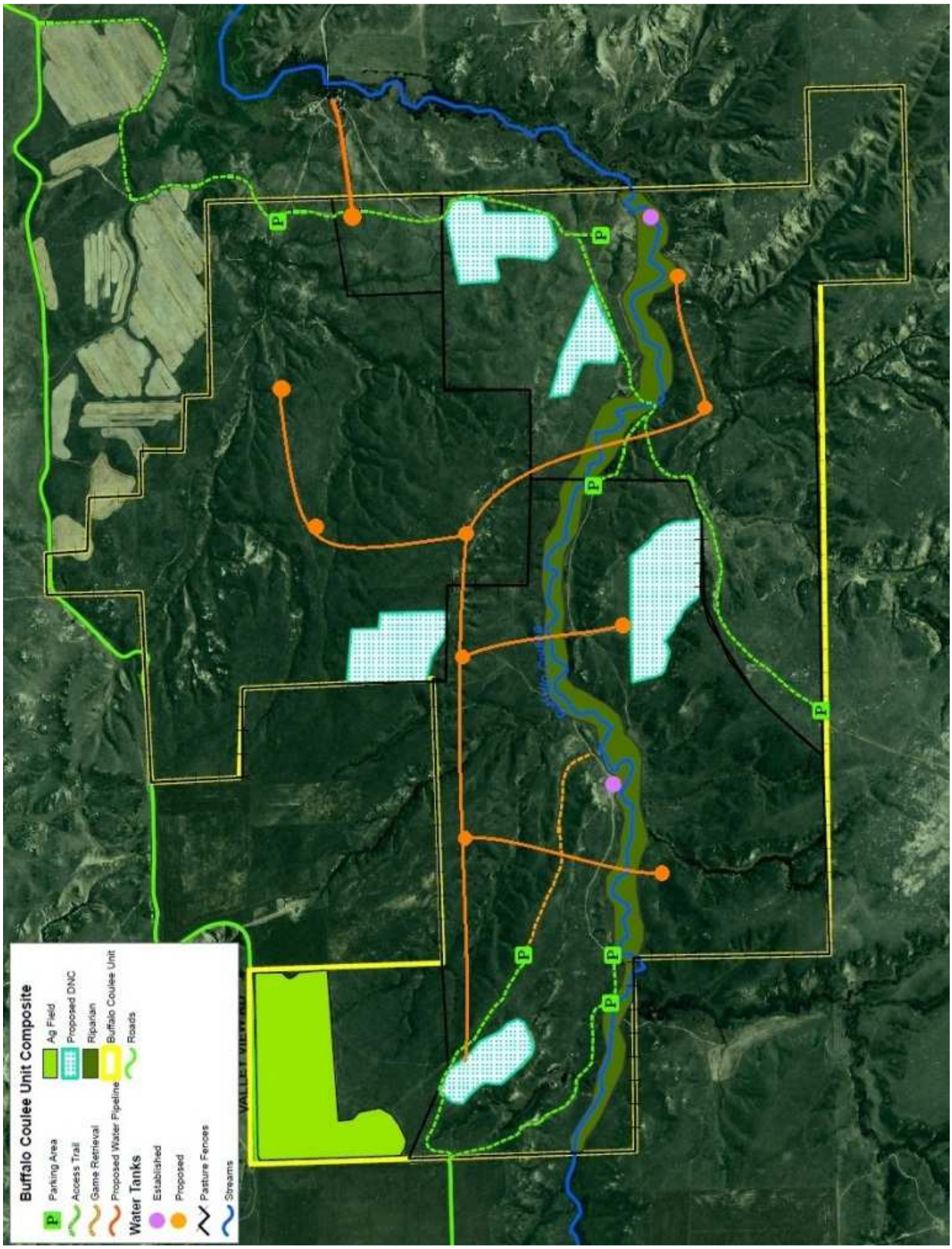
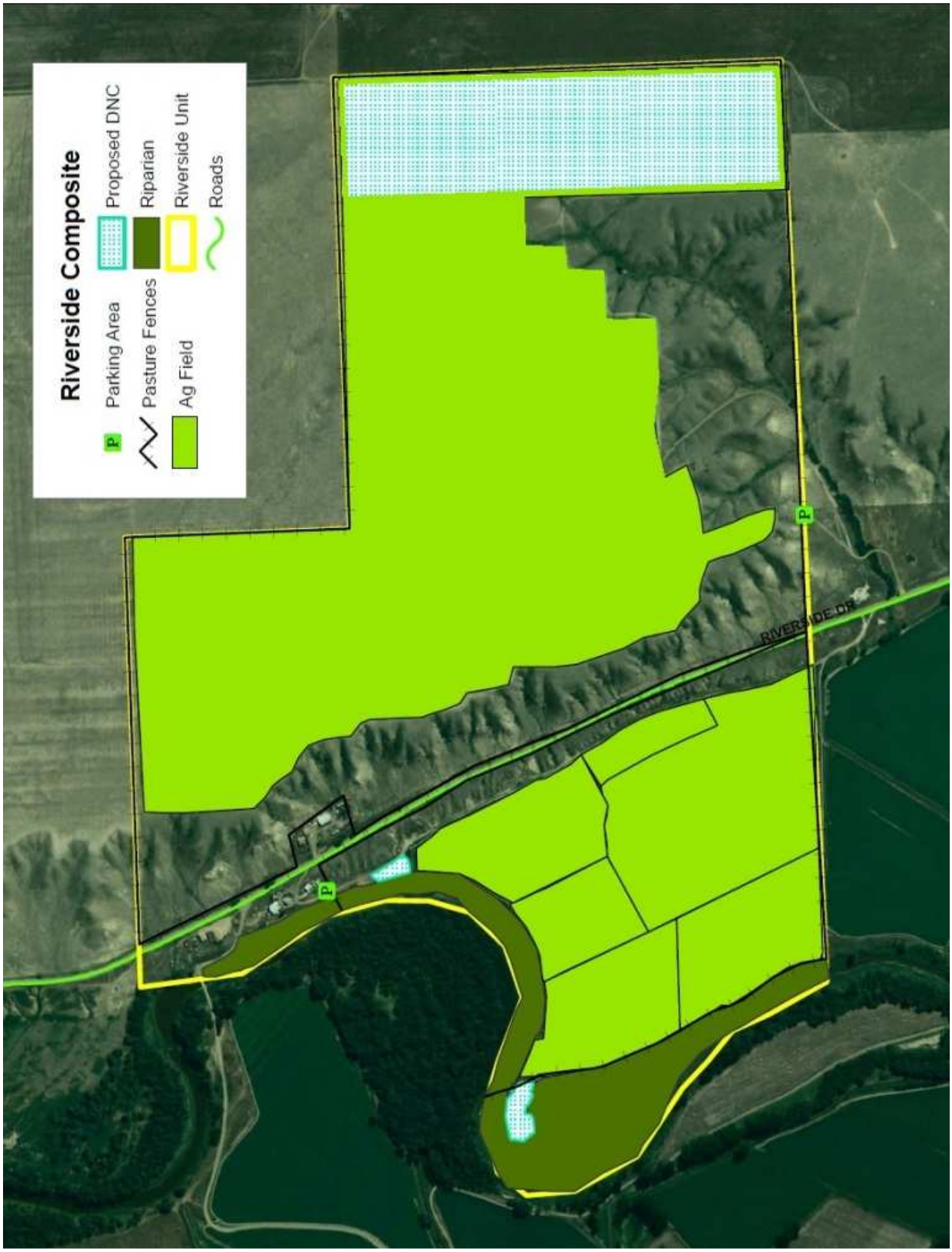

Mooney Coulee Unit Travel
Mooney Coulee Unit
Parking Area
Private Property
Roads
P
P
P
RIGGIN RD

Exhibit D – Composite of Proposed Improvements

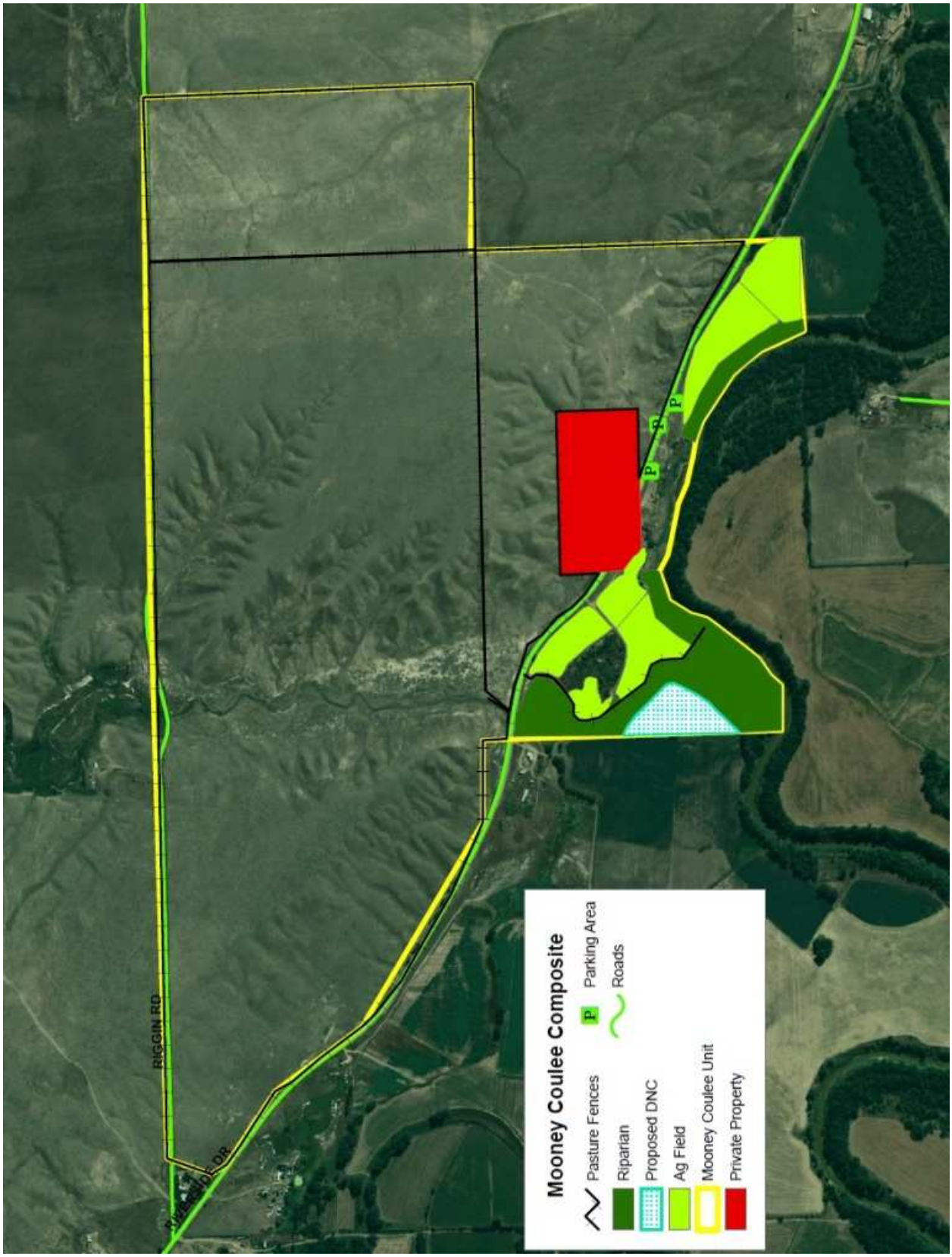
Buffalo Coulee Unit



Riverside Unit



Mooney Coulee Unit



APPENDIX III

BUFFALO COULEE PROJECT

CONSERVATION EASEMENT

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

Prepared by:
Rob Brooks & Kelvin Johnson
September 2012

I. INTRODUCTION

Montana FWP has the authority under State Law (87-1-201, Montana Code Annotated) to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. As with other FWP property acquisition proposals, the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission and the State Land Board (for easements greater than 100 acres or $100,000) must approve any easement proposal by the agency. Socioeconomic assessments are a part of the Environmental Assessment (EA) process, and evaluate the significant social and economic impacts of the purchase on local governments, employment, schools, and impacts on local businesses.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the purchase of a conservation easement on property currently owned by Potter Brothers Farms. The report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed conservation easement.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Description

The 2,825 acre Buffalo Coulee Project property is located in Valley County, approximately 2 miles southwest of Vandalia, and also includes property located 4 miles northwest of Glasgow, and 2 miles east of Tampico. The Milk River flows along the western boundaries of the river property, and Buffalo Coulee bisects the uplands unit near Vandalia. The property consists of riparian corridors, sagebrush and shrub grasslands, and plains grasslands. Critical winter range for migrating antelope, and habitat that serves as migratory linkage to migrating sage grouse, is included. The management plan for the property has a detailed description of the habitat types and acreage.

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

The Buffalo Coulee Project property supports whitetail deer, Merriam's turkeys, ring-necked pheasants, mourning doves, and waterfowl in its riparian and wetland communities; and supports game species include: mule deer, antelope, sage grouse, and sharp-tail grouse in its grassland complexes and sagebrush communities. A host of other non-game species are also supported by habitat associated with this property.

C. Current Use

The Buffalo Coulee Project property is a working ranch that raises hay, livestock, and cereal crops.

D. Management Alternatives
1) Purchase a conservation easement on the property by MFWP
2) No purchase

MFWP Purchase of Conservation Easement

The intent of the Buffalo Coulee Project Conservation Easement is to protect and enhance the wildlife habitat currently found on the property while maintaining the agricultural character of the property. Please refer to the Deed of Conservation Easement for a thorough explanation of the terms for this easement between MFWP and the Buffalo Coulee Project property.

No Purchase Alternative

The second alternative, the no purchase option, does not guarantee the protection the native habitats nor protect this land from future subdivision development, changes in land uses, or secure access for the public into the future.

This alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what the current owners decide to do with the property if MFWP does not purchase a conservation easement.

The economic impacts associated with this alternative have not been estimated.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Section II identified the management alternatives this report addresses. The purchase of a conservation easement will provide long-term protection of important wildlife habitat, keep the land in private ownership and provide for public access for hunting. Section III quantifies the social and economic impacts of this management option following two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

Financial impacts address the cost of the conservation easement to MFWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provides information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e. income and employment).

A. Financial Impacts

The conservation easement proposed on the Buffalo Coulee Project property will be secured by dollars from FWP's Habitat Montana Program. MFWP's financial obligation is estimated to be in the range of $400,000 to $800,000 pending appraisal.

Maintenance/management costs related to the easement are associated with monitoring the property to insure the easement terms are being followed.

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the purchase of the conservation easement. The conservation easement will not change the ownership of the property nor will it change the type or level of use on the property Therefore, the purchase of a conservation easement on this land will have no impact on the current level of taxes paid to Valley County.

B. Economic Impacts

The purchase of a conservation easement will not affect the agricultural activities on the Buffalo Coulee Project property. The number of livestock run on the property will not change. However a rest rotation grazing system will be implemented under the terms of the conservation easement. The financial impacts to local businesses will be neutral, given there is no significant changes to the agricultural practices on the property.

The easement will provide access for hunting. The number of hunters and number of hunter days are defined in the conservation easement agreement. Based on the minimum number of 750 annual hunter days and 150 fishing days specified in the conservation easement, the hunters and anglers utilizing the Buffalo Coulee Project property will contribute about $104,000 annually to businesses in the local economy. This estimate is based on about 70% of the hunting use being resident hunters and 30% nonresident, and 100% of the angling use being residents.

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The conservation easement will provide long-term protection for wildlife habitat, maintain the agricultural integrity of the land, and ensure public hunting opportunities.
The purchase of a conservation easement by MFWP will not cause a reduction in tax revenues on this property from their current levels to Valley County.

The agricultural/ranching operations will continue at their current levels. The financial impacts of the easement on local businesses will be neutral to slightly positive in both the short and long run.